

## Message Text

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ACTION AF-08

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 PM-04 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 CIAE-00

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R 230735Z NOV 76  
FM AMCONSUL ASMARA  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4241  
AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA  
INFO AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM  
AMEMBASSY LONDON  
AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO  
CINCUSNAVEUR LONDON  
COMNAVTELCOM WASHDC  
USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN  
COMIDEASTFOR  
NAVCOMMUNIT ASMARA  
NAVCOMMSTA NEA MAKRI  
CNO WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 0966

E.O. 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PINS, ET  
SUBJECT: CONTEST OF WILLS ALONG THE KEREN ROAD

REF: ASMARA 0895 (DTG 110650Z NOV 76)

1. SUMMARY: ON NOV 21, EPMG FORCES LAUNCHED THE LARGEST MILITARY OPERATION IN ERITREA THIS YEAR IN AN EFFORT TO ESCORT A SUPPLY CONVOY FROM ASMARA TO KEREN. THE ETHIOPIAN AUTHORITIES HAD LET IT BE KNOWN THAT THEY INTENDED TO FORCE THIS CONVOY THROUGH NO MATTER WHAT THE COST, WHILE THE INSURGENTS BOASTED THAT THEY WOULD DESTROY THE CONVOY IN DETAIL. DISSENTION AMONG UNITS OF THE EPMG FORCES MAY HAVE AN ADVERSE IMPACT ON THEIR EFFORTS. AFTER ONE DAY OF FIGHTING, THE CONVOY REMAINED IN ASMARA AWAITING THE SIGNAL THAT THE INITIAL INSURGENT BLOCKING EFFORTS HAD BEEN OVER-  
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COME.

2. IT HAD BEEN KNOWN FOR SEVERAL WEEKS THAT THE EPMG MILITARY WAS PREPARING A CONVOY TO RESUPPLY THEIR GARRISONS AND CIVIL POPULATION IN KEREN AND THE WESTERN LOWLANDS. THE LAST CONVOY TO KEREN TOOK PLACE IN MAY, AND MORE RECENT AIRLIFTING OF SUPPLIES WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY COSTLY. THE ETHIOPIAN ARMY'S INABILITY TO ACCOMPLISH RESUPPLY BY ROAD WAS ALSO A CONTINUING EMBARRASSMENT. BUOYED BY THEIR SUCCESS IN ESCORTING ADDIS CONVOYS TO AND FROM ASMARA IN OCTOBER, AND ANOTHER CONVOY TO DECAMERE AND SAGANEITI IN EARLY NOVEMBER (REFTTEL), THE EPMG MILITARY WERE DETERMINED TO ATTEMPT RESUPPLY OF KEREN AND THE WEST.

3. TO EFFECT THIS EXERCISE, THE COMMANDO POLICE (CP), WHO WERE MANNING NUMEROUS OUTPOSTS ALONG THE ASMARA-MASSAWA ROAD, WERE RECALLED TO ASMARA AND INSTRUCTED TO SPEARHEAD THE CONVOY ESCORT TO KEREN. COMPOUNDING THE EPMG'S PROBLEMS WAS THE CLOUD OF SUSPICION HANGING OVER THE CPS, WHO ARE LARGELY ERITREANS. ETHIOPIAN OFFICIALS HAVE ACCUSED THE CP OF DISLOYALTY, AND HAVE SPECIFICALLY ALLEGED THAT THOSE CPS WHO WERE CAPTURED IN AN UNSUCCESSFUL RELIEF MISSION OF NACFA IN SEPTEMBER, HAD IN FACT DESERTED TO THE INSURGENTS. THEREFORE THE EPMG HAS REFUSED TO PAY TO THE WIVES OF THOSE CPS THE SALARIES OF THEIR CAPTURED HUSBANDS. THIS HAS RESULTED IN FURTHER DISSENTION AMONG THE CPS AND REPORTEDLY HAD LET TO SEVERAL GENUINE DEFECTIONS.

4. AS PLANNING CONTINUED FOR THE KEREN CONVOY, THE EPMG AUTHORITIES LET IT BE KNOWN THEY INTENDED TO DRIVE THE CONVOY THROUGH NO MATTER WHAT THE COST IN LIVES AND EQUIPMENT. SOME 500 CIVILIAN TRUCKS WERE LOADED AND ASSEMBLED DURING THE FIRST WEEKS OF NOVEMBER, DESPITE INSURGENT COUNTER-CLAIMS THAT THEY WOULD DESTROY THE CONVOY TO THE LAST MAN AND VEHICLE. JUMP-OFF FOR THE RECONNAISSANCE PARTY OF THE ESCORT FORCE WAS SET FOR EARLY MORNING OF NOVEMBER 21. AN INAUSPICIOUS BEGINNING, HOWEVER, WAS SIGNALLED BY THE INSURGENTS SUCCESSFUL DESTRUCTION OF A MUNICIPAL PUMPING STATION AT A RESERVOIR SEVEN KM NW OF ASMARA, JUST OFF THE KEREN ROAD.

5. ON SUNDAY MORNING (NOV 21) THE EPMG MILITARY ESCORT MOVED THROUGH ASMARA AND OUT ONTO THE KEREN ROAD. THE TOTAL FORCE WAS REPORTED BY LOCAL SOURCES TO BE THREE THOUSAND MEN (MORE IMPARTIAL SOURCES PUT THE FIGURE AT ABOUT 1500), ACCOMPANIED BY APC AND OTHER CONFIDENTIAL

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ARMORED VEHICLES. THE ADVANCED PARTY OF CPS WAS REPORTED TO HAVE ENCOUNTERED INSURGENT RESISTANCE IN THE VICINITY OF THE VILLAGE OF INBA-DORHO, SOME 12 KM NNW OF ASMARA. THE CPS DEPLOYED AND WERE SUPPORTED BY ELEMENTS OF THE SECOND DIVISION. SUPPLY VEHICLES FOR THE ESCORT FORCES WERE HALTED ABOUT SIX KM FROM ASMARA AND APPARENTLY ALSO CAME UNDER ATTACK AS SEVERAL SLIGHTLY DAMAGED VEHICLES WERE OBSERVED BEING TOWED BACK TO ASMARA. SHORTLY AFTER DEPLOYING, EPMG FORCES CALLED IN AIR STRIKES WHICH LASTED INTO

THE EARLY EVENING, ALTHOUGH BY NIGHTFALL THERE WERE NO CONCLUSIVE RESULTS IN THE FIGHTING. EARLY SUNDAY MORNING, SEVERAL EXPLOSIONS WERE HEARD IN THE AREA OF THE DAY'S FIGHTING.

6. AT DAYBREAK MONDAY (NOV 22), EPMG FORCES WHICH HAD HELD THEIR POSITIONS DURING THE NIGHT AGAIN ENGAGED THE INSURGENTS, AND AIR STRIKES WERE RENEWED. BY LATE MORNING THE LAST BOMBING WAS HEARD IN THAT AREA AND TWO HELICOPTERS WERE OBSERVED FERRYING SUPPLIES AND EVACUATING WOUNDED. IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE IMMEDIATE AREA HAS BEEN SECURED, YET THE CIVILIAN CONVOY HAS ALREADY DISPERSED AS THE DRIVERS WERE TOLD MONDAY MORNING TO RETURN TO THEIR PARKING AREAS THROUGHOUT THE CITY AND AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS.

7. COMMENT: THIS ENGAGEMENT WILL BE CLOSELY MONITORED BY INSURGENT SYMPATHIZERS AND THE EPMG AUTHORITIES ALIKE. THE SIDE WHICH PREVAILS IN MAKING GOOD ITS BOASTS WILL GARNER A SUBSTANTIAL GAIN IN PRESTIGE. THIS ACTION ALONG THE KEREN ROAD MAY ALSO OFFER SIGNIFICANT INDICATIONS OF THE ABILITY OF THE ELF AND THE PLF TO COOPERATE IN THE FIELD, AS THE ROAD ITSELF IS CONSIDERED TO BE THE OPERATIONAL DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN THE TWO INSURGENT ELEMENTS, AND SUCCESS IN THWARTING THE CONVOY WILL PROBABLY REFLECT COORDINATION BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS.  
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